

The Education Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 3100
Hartford, CT

Regarding 1096: An Act Concerning Charter Schools

Co-Chairs Senator Slossberg and Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Education Committee, including State Representative Andre Baker of Bridgeport and of the Bridgeport Board of Education:

Thank you for your public service to our state and to the hundreds of thousands of children and families who rely on our public education system. As you know, our public education system is an existential on-ramp for their progress and, moreover, for the progress of our municipalities, state, and country. **Outsourcing our public education system to non-educators and uncertified hacks preaching disruptive innovations or salvation or both is an enormous mistake that we can no longer afford to make as a society.**

Since moving to Bridgeport in September 2012 from Fairfield, I've become aware of at least four seriously troubling and interrelated matters regarding public education in our state's most populous city:

1. Bridgeport has failed to meet the state-mandated minimum budget requirement (MBR) by NOT funding at least 20% of its public education budget two years running – with evidently no penalties from the state for doing this.

Swift legislative action is needed now.

2. A series of unacceptably bad, widely reported acts by and regarding Families for Urban Schools of Excellence (FUSE), its former CEO, pseudo-“Dr.”, multiple felon Michael Sharpe, and some in leadership at FUSE's Jumoke Academy at

P.L. Dunbar School (grades K-8) in Bridgeport. How can we allow such betrayal of the public trust and of the economically disadvantaged population that FUSE was contracted by our state to serve? No matter how many Ivy League degrees and good intentions your State Board of Education may have, they have utterly failed to ensure due diligence and adequate oversight of charter schools in Bridgeport and in our state. **Meaningful, binding legislative oversight is needed now.**

3. The reported financial relationships between a handful of ministers in the African American community in Bridgeport and the charter school enterprise, including pro-charter school groups. One example: ConnCan's leaders and a veritable who's-who of pro-charter school lobbyists in the Northeast just last month financially supported a highly controversial minister in Bridgeport running for state senate. This same minister is a member of the Bridgeport Board of Education, while serving on the board of an incoming charter school led by the highly controversial and appallingly inappropriate Steve Perry. His family's daycare business in Bridgeport was found through a recent state audit to have overbilled the state more than \$75,000. My wife and I have witnessed this minister at Bridgeport Board of Education meetings stating for the record that he tells his church members to "run from the public schools" and to "run to the charters." He reportedly said at another public Board of Education meeting that he does not send his own children to the Bridgeport Public Schools, which by the way employ his wife, because to do so would constitute "child abuse." This is just one example of the destructive, self-serving forces that the charter school enterprise has enlisted, to the detriment of an efficient, fair, and evidence-based use of our precious public dollars to provide sound public education for the least advantaged of our state's children. Calling this a disgrace is putting it nicely. No wonder the FBI is reportedly investigating FUSE and Jumoke and perhaps others in the charter school enterprise here. **Real, "the buck stops here," legislative intervention is needed now.**

4. Bridgeport Mayor Bill Finch's open and unquestioning support of the charter school enterprise in Bridgeport, including his letter of support to the State Department of Education on behalf of Steve Perry for Perry's application to open a charter school in Bridgeport. At the same time, Finch is the person most responsible for the underfunding of our public schools. Despite the Bridgeport Board of Education's recommendation to the Malloy administration against approving Perry's charter school application, Malloy's previous Commissioner of Education and the State Board of Education last spring approved Perry's plan to open a privately owned, publicly funded charter school in Bridgeport. **Active legislative review and control is needed now.**

Not a parent, but an unrelenting believer in the necessity and power of public education, I have volunteered in the after-school Lighthouse Program at Luis Munoz Marin elementary -- a Bridgeport public school managed since 2014 by the state-run Commissioner's Network. The Lighthouse Program serves both children attending Marin and children attending nearby charter schools. I'm glad it does. Like most people, I see all children as equally deserving of academic, psychosocial, and medical support. However, I have noticed that the charter-school kids purposely sit apart from their non-charter school peers to the point of ignoring them. Furthermore, my wife and I have witnessed at Bridgeport Board of Education meetings groups of charter school children in the audience purposely not applaud their non-charter childhood peers being recognized by the Board of Education for an academic or extracurricular achievement. And the charter school activists would like to claim that they are seeking to work together with the public school community, really? **Legislative checks and balances are needed now.**

I think the words of the writer and educator Sarah Darer Littman sum it up very well -- from her editorial of January 9, 2015 "Where's the Accountability? Anyone"? on CTNewsJunkie.com:

Listening to these same enablers say that “it’s for the kids” while they fleece the public purse is infuriating. But what really enrages me is knowing that there are so many fine educators in classrooms across this state trying to teach and help children day in and day out while being deprived of basic resources, while politicians are allowing our taxpayer dollars to be siphoned off by crooks.

Please vote to place a moratorium on additional state funding on dubious charter schools. Ideally, you’d also ensure a thorough outside audit of all existing state-funded charter schools and the rigorous implementation of an ongoing systematic review, outside the deleterious influence of the well-endowed charter school enterprise. Finally, please hold Bridgeport city government accountable for failing to meet the MBR two years running. **What happens now is up to you. If you do nothing, you risk furthering these shameful and preventable problems – at a cost that we cannot afford.**

Thank you for your time and considerations to this important legislation.

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